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Kelly's Corner

by Carl E. Lind

In my early youth our gang hung around Kelly's corner. We weren't dangerous; we probably came by the gang moniker from "our Gang" comedies in the movies. The focal point of our corner lounging was a green metal mail box, about four feet above the ground, hung on a sturdy concrete post. People dropped their outgoing mail in a flipper slot at the top of the box.

Kelly was a druggist who owned the drug store building on the corner. Old man Kelly had white scaggly hair growing atop a pale, almost pure white complexion. Above his brush mustache, and resting on his nose, was a pair of black-rimmed glasses. He didn't smile much and didn't talk much either, yet we were his friends and he never said a word about our daily congregating on his pavement.

It was a two-story brick building that extended the full length of the property, ending at a narrow alley in the rear. Mr. Kelly occupied the front portion of the first floor with his apothecary, the middle he rented to an Italian tailor, and adjoining the alley was a garage which never seemed to be used.

Upstairs was an apartment that he rented. The front door of the store was angled across the corner and equally faced the corner bordering streets. In the 53rd street window was a large hanging apothecary's globe filled with a brown liquid the meaning of which I knew not.

Inside, the store was divided into three sections. Up front was a soda fountain with four high wired-framed stools having round seats. There he dispensed ice cream, coca cola and plain soda when he pulled black-knobbed levers. It was where our parents got a fizzed-up chocolate soda with a spoon of

cator oil mixed in when we were sick. My blood still curdles when I think of how awful that tasted even hidden in chocolate.

On the Kingessing Ave. side were four telephone booths, each with a seat and a door. Since nobody had telephones in their homes, people would call the drug store giving an address of the party to come and answer the phone. We kids competed with each other when Mr. Kelly popped his nose out the door and asked one of us to be the messenger; the party contacted gave us a few pennies or occaissionally a whole nickel.

At the rear of the store was the prescription counter, where one-pint bottles labeled as medicine were often dispensed. We figured that was "hooch", this being the era of prohibition. I suspect my grandfather had a toddy or two from such a concoction.

Outside Kelly's drugstore was a wide concrete pavement on the Kingsessing Ave. side, extending the length of the building. This was our playground. Two grates over window wells by the tailor shop sometimes would have a penny or some other treasure dropped by accident. These we fished out using a long stick to which we stuck a piece of chewing gum. To the telephone pole near the curb we fastened a tomato can, gathered from peoples Thursday night trash; this became our basketball hoop into which we targeted a small rubber ball. From the same trash we plucked an empty Mother's Oats carton, oval in shape, which we stuffed with paper. This simulated a football and many a scrum we had with it, leading to many bruised knees and scraped elbows on the concrete as we tackled each other. I dreaded the thought of bumping or coming up under the mailbox - that would really hurt!

Outside was a large 100 gallon round drum in the street close by the curb, where we built fires that were especially neat on cold winter days. Sometimes we would put a potato on a stick and roast it. The fires we started were mostly when Mr. Kelly would have us clean out his basement of paper that he put down the chute from the soda fountain, plus boxes and other trash, all for a nickel.

Come spring and warm weather our activities changed. Two games we played were with a used coke bottle cap which we stuffed with silver foil from used cigarette packs; this gave

the bottle cap added weight. One game was block baseball on a field we drew on the sidewalk, with chalk someone borrowed from a school blackboard. It was a square with infield bases which we circled by moving the stuffed bottle cap, striking it using our middle finger and thumb like a spring. Each taking turns, first one home was the winner. The bottle cap was also used in pitching it to see who could get the closest to the wall of the building. finger and thumb like a spring. Each taking turns, first one home was the winner. The bottle cap was also used in pitching it to see who could get the closest to the wall of the building. Older boys, who had pennies, would use them instead of bottle caps, and of course the closest one would get to keep the other guy's penny. That was big-time gambling! Then there was "hot beans", a game played with a stiff stick. The one who was it closed his eyes while everyone else hid. Then he searched to find them and when he did he had the privilege of whacking them with the stiff stick on their rear end all the way back to home base; they in turn became "it".

Without Mr. Kelly's corner drugstore, where else might we have gone? What mischief might we have fiddled our idle time with? I often wonder how my generation differs with that of today. Our choices were few, our pleasures simple, money was scarce to non-existent, and since we knew little else than struggle, we were very happy. We had a great respect for authority and when we spied the policeman walking his beat, twirling his billy club, we scattered, and having done nothing wrong I often wondered why?